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AUTHOR Ediger, Marlow
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ABSTRACT

The importance of tidy, legible handwriting which effectively communicates ideas may be made evident to students through the use of purposeful, realistic writing situations. The writing of letters, diaries, poems, and invitations may provide a beneficial use of time and motivate students to improve their handwriting. The teacher can develop in them an awareness of the kinds of errors which result in illegibility by keeping personal folders in which each student measures his own progress, by allowing opportunities for the class to study individual examples of writing, by utilizing reputable handwriting booklets as models, and by pacing lessons with regard to the age and attention span of the group. (MF)

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HANDWRITING AND THE STUDENT

by Marlow Ediger

Legible, tidy handwriting is important for students in the elementary school so that written ideas can be effectively communicated to others. The classroom teacher has an important responsibility in challenging students to utilize their best handwriting when completing the final drafts of written work. One of his obligations toward this end is to help students become aware of the difficulties involved in reading illegible writing; of how much time can be lost in trying to decipher it.

It is not enough, of course, to merely call students' attention to the demerits related to bad handwriting; they need to have numerous learning activities, activities that will provide for individual differences found in any classroom. Let us examine some possible activities.

We know that each student will have to develop the inward desire of wanting to improve if he is in fact to show improvement. The question, then, is what can be done to enkindle the desire? A personal folder for each student, with his name on it and easily available, might be one place to start. The student can then select from all his written work the paper which represents his best handwriting. From that point on, one goal for each student on each

written assignment would be to surpass his previous best handwriting. Following the writing would be the assessment by the student and the teacher of how well he had succeeded. If it is better, the student can place the last writing atop his previous best. If not, it must go under or be stored some other place. Obviously, it would help to have the student write the date on each paper for current and later comparison. Such activity will, hopefully, help the student feel a need in wanting to improve his handwriting.

Another way of helping students improve their handwriting is to have them notice the kinds of errors which result in illegibility. These can be effectively brought home to them by using the opaque or overhead projector to project desirable and undesirable sample papers for all the class to analyze, compare, and contrast. A readily available source of sample papers would be writings by students of previous years. Names could be clipped off to prohibit identification, thus preventing criticism of the person instead of the paper.

Once students have shown that they can discriminate between good and bad handwriting it may be profitable to project papers from the current class itself. However, to forestall criticism of fellow students instead of their papers, it would be desirable first to project samples of the best handwriting of each student in the class for analysis of how to improve the handwriting, then later to compare a second paper to it, analyzing improvements made.

A system could be worked out so as not to bore students. For instance, with a class of 28, the papers of four different students could be studied each day for seven days. In four, five, or six weeks, another seven-day period could be used to repeat the procedure, comparing each student's latest writing with the last one he had had projected and examined. Again, attention would be focused on where improvement is evident. Since two papers would be examined each time after the first, for each student, it would be necessary for students to write the date of writing on each paper. Such a rotation system could be followed for an academic year, or any part of it, as long as students remain interested in doing it and improve their handwriting. As always, when using students' writing for analysis, careful attention must be given to fostering an atmosphere of respect toward others. Students must criticize papers, not peers.

Students can learn to evaluate the quality of their own hand-

writing by utilizing a reputable handwriting booklet as a model. by comparing their own handwriting with that in the handwriting booklet, pupils can notice strengths and weaknesses in the formation of letters, proportion of letters, alignment of letters as well as words, proper and uniform slant of letters, and spacing of letters and words.

When engaged in writing activities students should be carefully supervised and receive free but judicious praise. The writing experiences themselves should be interesting, varied, enjoyable, and reveal purpose for learning to write legibly. Such experiences cannot be provided by routine book reports on all library books read or on an excessive number of reports about topics assigned by the teacher. However, students need to learn how to write reports on both books and interesting topics. Thus, they may be more interested in writing diary entries, poems, business and friendly letters, invitations, and stories. Such variety not only helps promote student interest, but helps provide for meeting individual differences since some students may exhibit more interest in one kind of writing than others.

Of particlaur interest as a writing activity may be a letter to parents inviting them to a class or school program. Not only might students see purpose in such activity, they should desire to utilize their best handwriting, knowing that their letters would actually be read by persons outside the classroom. Either manuscript or cursive writing could be utilized, depending on the students' level of achievement. The contents of the letter could be developed cooperatively by students with teacher guidance (especially for younger students). More able students could develop the contents of their own letters.

Thus far this paper has focused on the learning activities teachers can provide to help students develop more legible handwriting. The teacher's job, however, involves more than this to accomplish the goal. He must also gauge the time to be spent on writing activities, aware that students of different ages must be handled differently. For instance, first grade students, who are just beginning the actual practice of handwriting, need short periods for practice or they feel tension and fatigue. Besides allotting appropriate time, the teacher needs to select only beneficial activities, not wasting time drilling on concepts already mastered. Finally, the teacher must set a good example by providing neat and legible samples of handwriting habits.

There is much the teacher can do to help students improve their handwriting. He can help them develop an inward desire to improve their legibility, determine and overcome common errors in illegible handwriting, experience a variety of writing activities, see purpose in good handwriting through realistic writing situations, and continuously practice their best handwriting. If the teacher works with his students in these ways, is aware of the learning level or levels of his class, and provides good examples of handwriting for students to follow, students should exhibit improvement in their handwriting.